

# Helen Brooke Taussig

1898-1986, BALTIMORE CITY

*It's the clinical errors that keep you humble...  
You have your sadnesses as well as your successes.*

The young teenager, Edi, from New Jersey, born in the 1930s, had never known a normal life. Her family could not remember the exact diagnosis, but they knew she had a hole in her heart. Thus she was called a "blue baby." She could barely walk short distances without turning blue and gasping for breath. Despite her debilitating handicap, however, she was not one to forego living. Whenever she wanted to do something, her supportive family and friends just carried her—to school, to church, on picnics—wherever she needed or wanted to go.

In 1948, Edi read a newspaper article about an experimental heart surgery being performed at Johns Hopkins University. Pediatric cardiologist Dr. Helen Taussig had pioneered the surgery and was saving lives with it. Edi was determined, despite her family's opposition, to meet Dr. Taussig and undergo the surgery that could give her a chance at a normal life. As a sixteenth birthday gift, the family took Edi to Baltimore to see Dr. Taussig.

Taussig's life had not been easy. When Taussig was given permission to enroll at Harvard's School of Public Health, the dean told her that no woman would be granted a degree. She also learned that women were not admitted to Harvard Medical School, although she could take some courses there. Like Edi, her future patient, she persevered. Taussig got into Boston University's School of Medicine and later graduated from Johns Hopkins University in 1927. She wanted to study internal medicine but was denied an internship because another woman from her class had already been accepted into the only slot allowed for women (Stevenson 368). Instead, she accepted a pediatric internship, and she began her work at the pediatric cardiac clinic. Physicians at the clinic were reluctant to refer most of their heart patients to a woman pediatrician, but as Taussig recalled, "they gladly referred their 'blue babies' to me as nothing could be done for them" (Curtis 295).

Blue babies faced difficult short lives. The cause of such a baby's blue skin was a heart defect known as tetralogy of Fallot. The blue color, cyanosis, caused by the narrowing or closure of the pulmonary artery, prevented blood from being adequately oxygenated. Unoxygenated blood is darker and gives the skin a bluish color. Blue babies are literally starved of oxygen. As Dr. Taussig studied this congenital affliction, she was determined to find a cure.

Taussig had witnessed famous surgeon Dr. Alfred Blalock perform a procedure on another genetic abnormality whereby he sealed a defective blood vessel to the lungs that had not closed normally after birth. "It seemed to me," Taussig said, "that if he could close an artery to the heart, he could open one" (Stevenson 369). She reasoned that if a surgically created bypass could bring the dark venous blood back to the lungs, then blue babies could get enough oxygen in their blood.

Blalock and Taussig talked and experimented. On November 29, 1944, Blalock performed the first operation on an eleven-month-old girl. Taussig stayed with her constantly during the postoperative period, doing everything possible to ensure her survival. She remembered the child's emotional mother looking for



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the first time at her child's pink skin, proclaiming the surgery a miracle (Curtis 298). In the following years, over a thousand young patients journeyed to Hopkins, now considered the refuge of hope.

Blalock and Taussig traveled together throughout the United States and the world demonstrating their new procedure and writing about their work. Not surprisingly, these famous doctors received honors and recognition everywhere they went. Taussig went on to publish *Congenital Malformations of the Heart* in 1947 because she believed she had a moral obligation to enlighten others.

However, despite her focus on heart disease, Taussig was deeply concerned about anything that threatened young people's health. Thus when a West German pharmaceutical firm marketed a controversial drug called Contragan, Taussig quickly got involved. The drug was popular with pregnant women because it not only acted as a sedative but also prevented nausea. The company wanted to market the drug in the United States under the name of Thalidomide. But Taussig had already learned from a former student that several babies of mothers who had taken the drug were born with abnormalities of the arm and legs, a number of them missing all of their extremities (Curtis 299). So Dr. Taussig wasted no time in traveling to Germany to examine the babies and question the mothers. Her investigation resulted in the United States banning Thalidomide. Taussig again saved countless lives.

By 1964, Taussig became the first woman elected president of the American Heart Association. In that same year, she received the Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor the president of the United States can bestow. In 1973, she was among the first twenty women in the United States inducted into the Women's Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls, New York (Maryland Women's Hall of Fame).

Scientific contributions are only part of what Taussig gave to medicine. She also gave devoted compassion to her small patients and their families. Shy in speaking about herself, Dr. Taussig once commented: "It's the clinical errors that keep you humble... You have your sadnesses as well as your successes. One reads all about the successful operations, but not about the unsuccessful ones, the sorrow..." (Stevenson 370). Helen Taussig shed tears with parents when things went wrong with their children; when Edi died two weeks after surgery, Helen Taussig cried with her family. #

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# ACHIEVEMENT

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# HISTORY

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